

# Women's Representation in the Federal Workforce



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The U.S. federal government, with its 2.1 million civilian workforce is one of the largest employers in the country. The 15 Cabinet and 107 independent agencies employ 1.5% of America's workers.

So, how well are women represented in that labor force?

This paper delves into that question and others:

Are men and women equally likely to work for the government?

Are there differences in their propensity to hold leadership positions?

How has women's representation in the civil service changed throughout time?

### **First, a brief overview:**

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM), an independent Executive Branch agency, provides information about U.S. federal employees through FedScope.

The data includes characteristics such as gender, age, and education level of civilian employees across the Cabinet and independent agencies.

An investigation of federal employees from 1998 to 2017 reveals fewer women than men work for the U.S. government and women's representation has not increased during the last 20 years.

The lack of female civil servants is most pronounced among the highest ranks in the federal workforce, the Senior Executive Service, but the data does show some progress for women in leadership roles.

# Women's Representation in the Federal Government

The OPM's most recent report (March 2017) shows approximately 92% of bureaucrats, or 1,916,855 people, work in Cabinet agencies.

The Department of Defense (DOD) is the largest federal agency and employs about 38% of all Cabinet personnel; nearly twice the size of the second largest agency, Veterans Affairs (VA).

With 4,215 employees, the Department of Education (DOE) is the smallest in the Cabinet.

Independent agencies range from 12 employees at the Commission of Fine Arts, to 62,183 at the Social Security Administration (SSA). (See Table 1)

**Table 1: The 20 Largest Federal Agencies, 2017**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Number of Employees</b>
Defense	732,388
Veterans Affairs	377,805
Homeland Security	194,864
Justice	117,287
Treasury	99,352
Agriculture	86,829
Health & Human Services	86,279
Interior	64,191
Social Security Administration	62,183
Transportation	55,217
Commerce	46,988
National Aeronautics & Space Admin.	17,360
Environmental Protection Agency	15,797
Labor	15,617
Energy	14,998
State	12,833
General Services Administration	11,676
Housing & Urban Development	7,992
Federal Deposit Insurance Commission	6,177
Education	4,215

**Across the Executive Branch, 43.6% of employees are women (see Figure 1).** The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports women comprise 46.8% of the U.S. labor force so female employees are better represented elsewhere than as federal civil servants.

**The percentage of women in the U.S. government also decreased during the last two decades, from 44.4% in 1998. Between 1998 and 2017, the civil service grew by 277,374 employees, but the number of positions held by women grew by just 106,450, or 38% of the increase.**

**Figure 1: Percentage of Women in the U.S. Federal Workforce, 1998 - 2017**

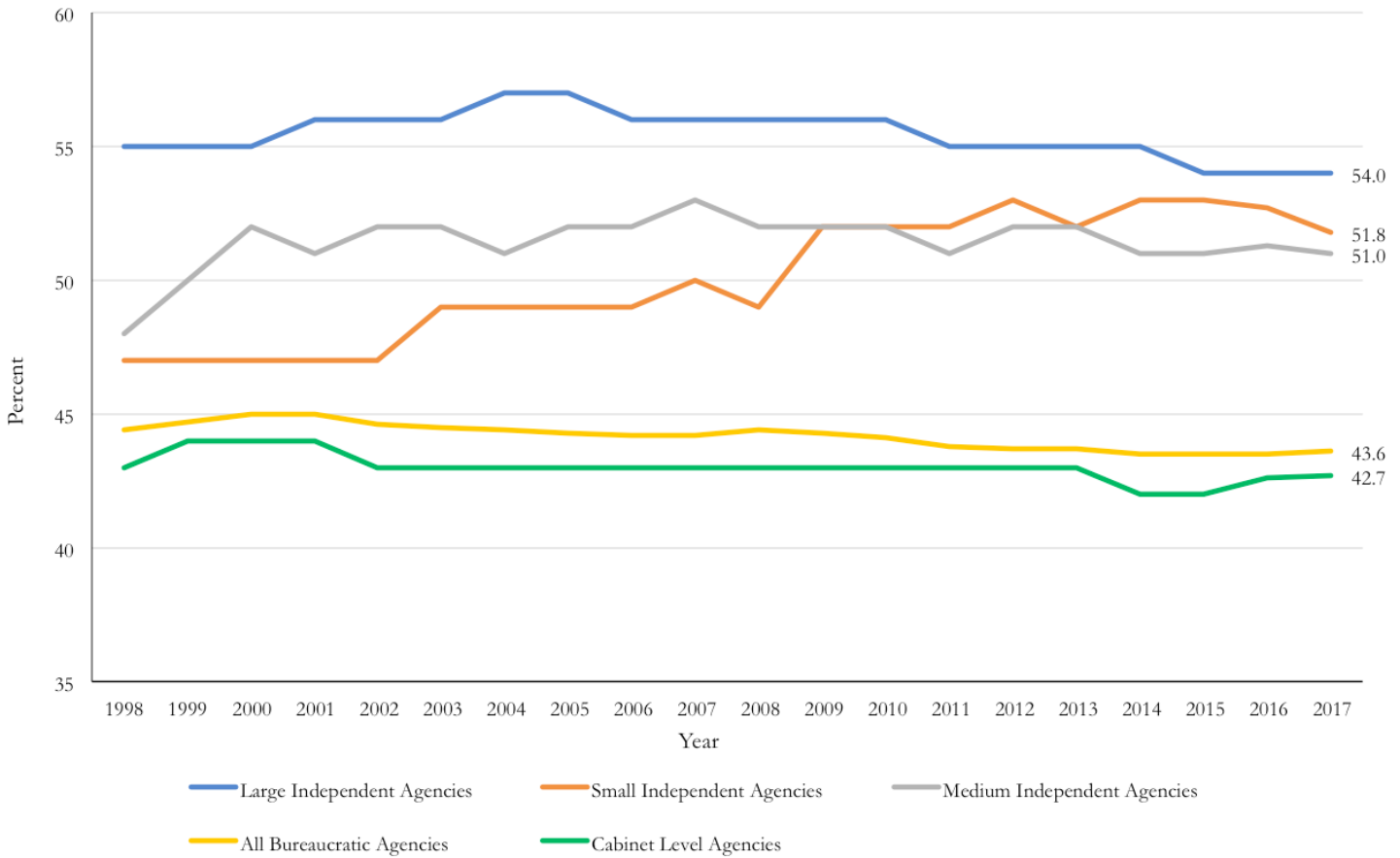


Figure 1 shows women comprise about 42.7% of the positions in the Cabinet.

This is a decrease - of half a percentage point - from the 43.2% held by women 20 years ago.

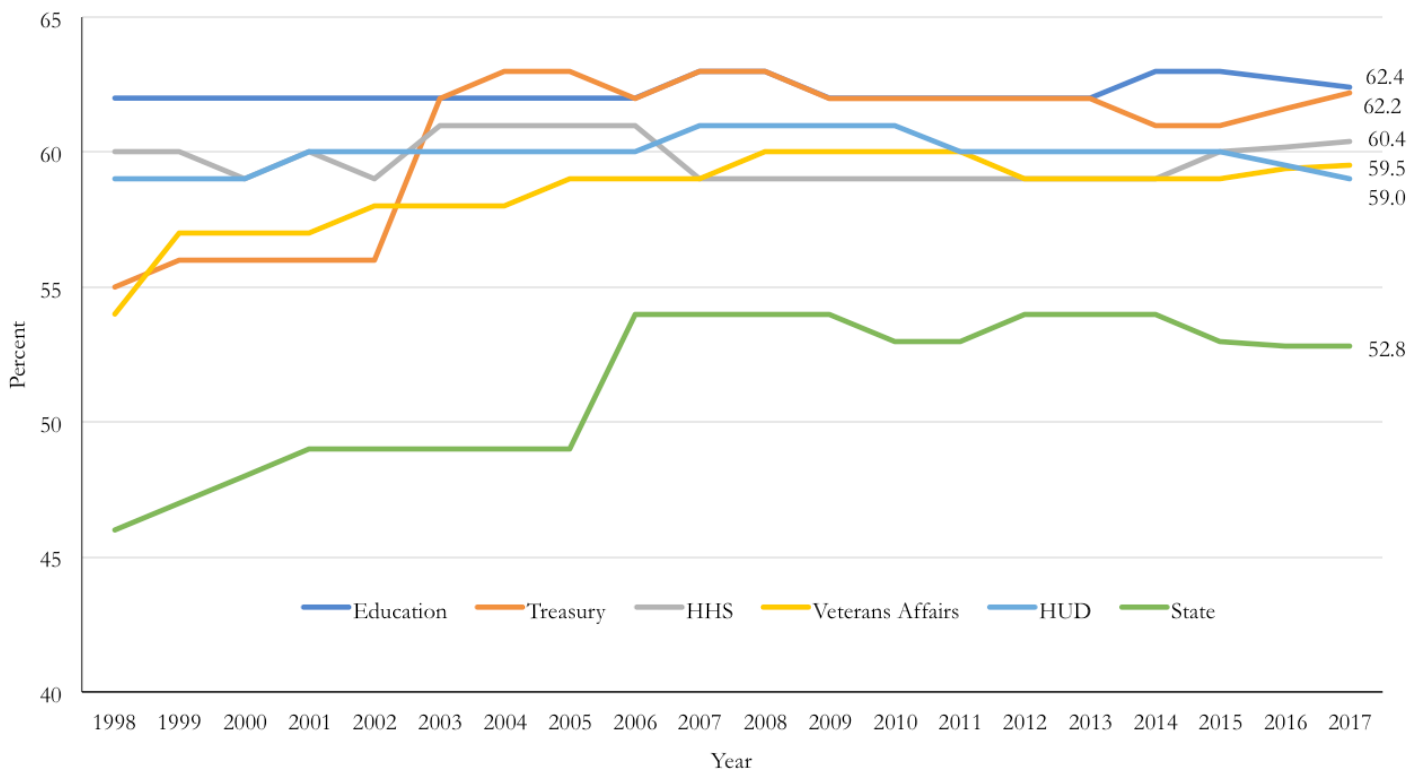
Women fare better in the independent bureaucratic agencies; roughly **53.7% of independent agency employees are women**. Female civil servants are 54% of the labor force at large agencies (more than 1,000 employees), and 51% and 51.8% at medium (100 - 999 employees) and small agencies (fewer than 100 employees), respectively. The percentage of women in the independent agencies has also decreased by about one percentage point since 1998.

Women are under-represented in the civil service, but there are large differences in gender diversity across agencies. Starting with the Cabinet, women's representation ranges from 26.4% at the Department of Transportation (DOT) to 62.4% at DOE.

Figure 2 displays 20-year trends of women's representation in the six Cabinet agencies where women are at least half the workforce. More than 60% of today's workers at DOE, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Treasury are women. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and VA are close behind, with 59.5% and 59% female employees, respectively. Almost 53% of civil servants at the Department of State are women (not including Foreign Service Officers).

Most agencies in Figure 2 maintained or made small gains in the percentage of female employees throughout the last 20 years. At VA, the increase was about five percentage points. These trends show the overall decrease in women's civil service representation between 1998 and 2017 is not driven by agencies where women are well represented.

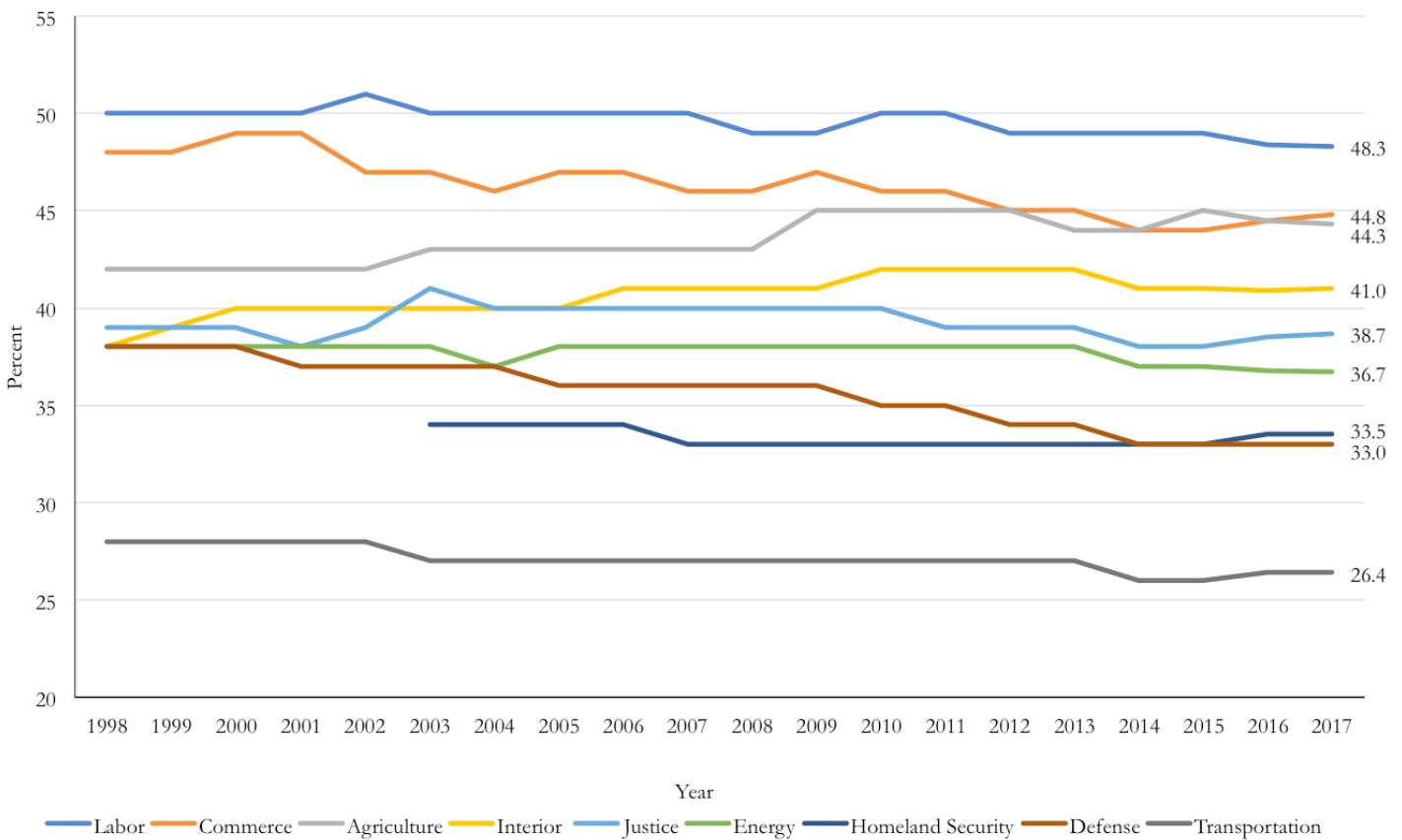
**Figure 2: Percentage of Female Employees in Agencies with at Least 50% Women, 1998 - 2017**



In the majority of Cabinet agencies, however, the percentage of women is less than 50% (see Figure 3). **The Department of Labor (DOL) comes close to gender parity with 48% female employees - slightly higher than in the U.S. labor force. Commerce and Agriculture, with 44.8% and 44.3%, respectively, are just behind DOL. Only about one-third of the workers at Homeland Security (DHS) and DOD are women, while DOT has just 26.4% female employees.**

In all but two departments in Figure 3, the percentage of female employees declined throughout the last two decades. The proportion of women at Agriculture and Interior increased, though the number of both male and female employees decreased as the agencies got smaller. The percentage of women in the other agencies fell by amounts ranging from less than one percentage point at DHS (since its creation in 2003) to almost five at DOD. Defense is the only Cabinet agency that increased in size with a corresponding decrease in the number of female employees.

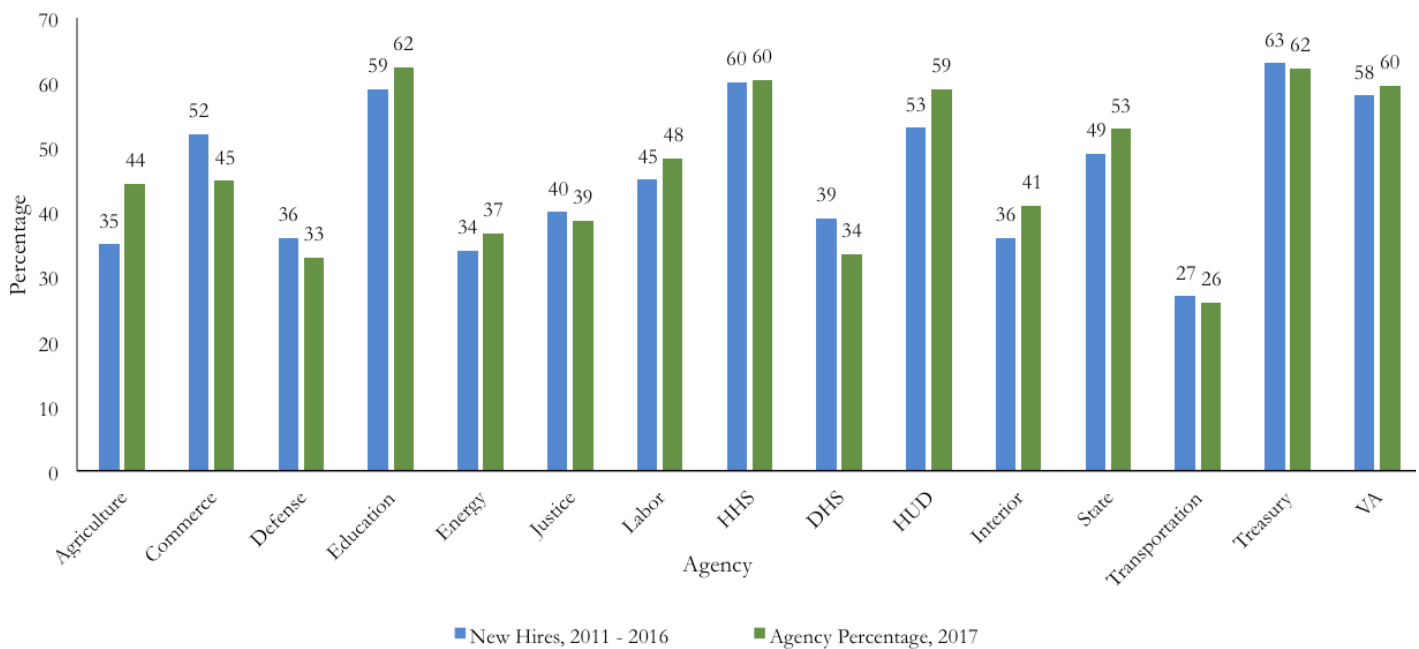
**Figure 3: Percentage of Female Employees in Agencies with Fewer Than 50% Women, 1998 - 2017**



Homing in on new hires at Cabinet agencies sheds light on this trend. Figure 4 shows the percentage of female new hires from 2011 – 2016 is comparable to the percentage of women employed in each agency in 2017. Most civil service positions are filled through new hires, so women's presence in

the Cabinet will not increase if agencies are not hiring a greater proportion of women. Commerce, DHS, and DOD are exceptions; all three hired larger percentages of women than they have as employees.

**Figure 4: Comparison of Female New Hires and Women's Agency Representation**

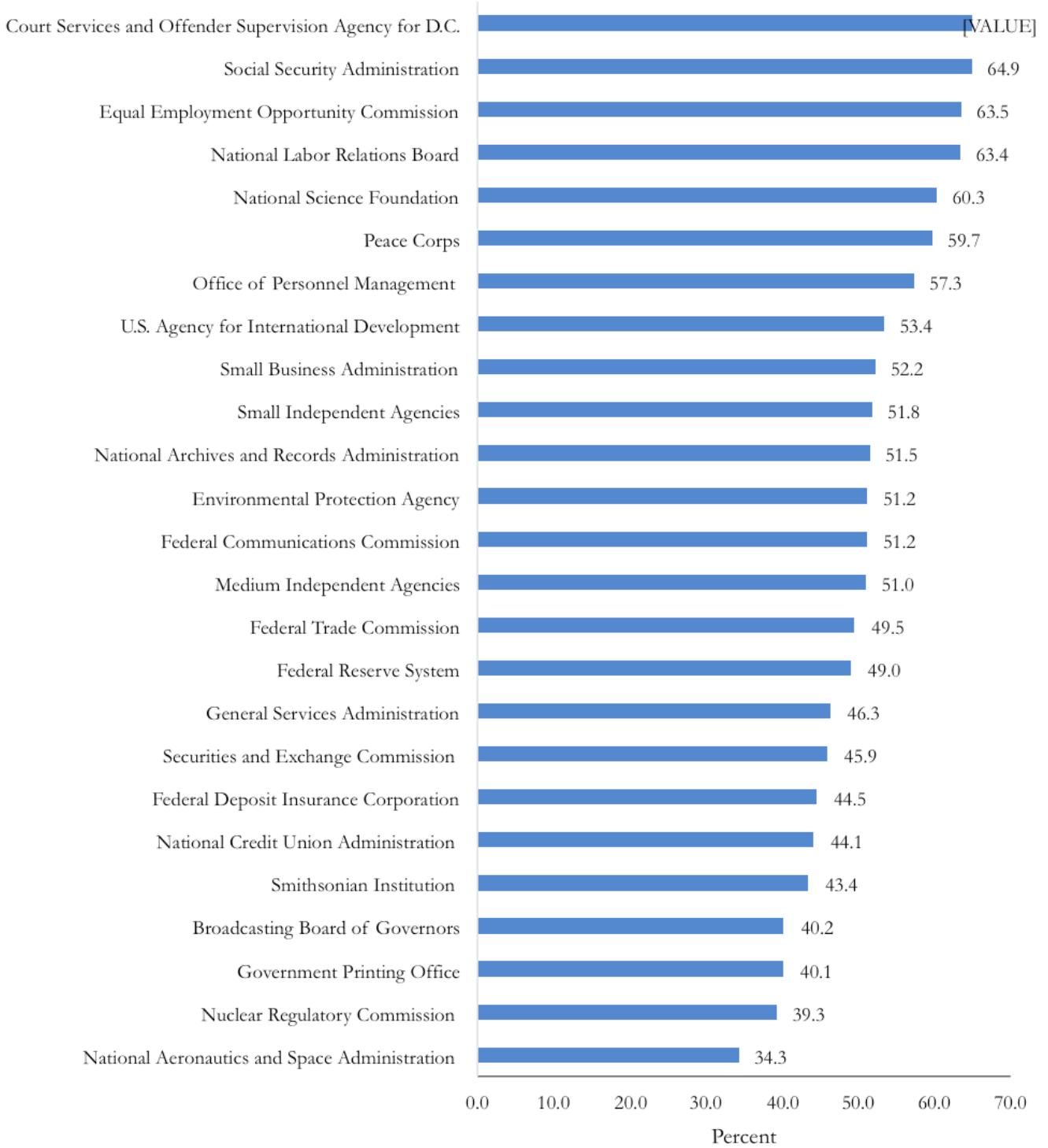


Attrition rates also impact women's civil service representation. Since 2011, 216,070 female employees have quit Cabinet agency employment, representing 49.5% of all resignations. Women represent a larger proportion of workers voluntarily leaving the Cabinet than are currently employed. The percentages of women who were terminated or died, however, are lower than their civil service presence, at 40.5% and 33.6%, respectively. Women represent only a slightly higher percentage of Cabinet agency departures than they do employees, but this small difference is consistent with the recent downward trend of women's government representation.

Female employees generally make up a larger percentage of resignations in agencies where women are not well-represented. If the agencies in Figure 3 do not slow women's attrition rates or start hiring larger proportions of female employees, the decline in women's government representation will continue.

Turning to the large independent agencies shows variety in women's representation (see Figure 5). NASA and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission are at the bottom of the list; fewer than 40% of the employees at each agency are women. Women are at least 50% of the employees at more than half the independent agencies.

Figure 5: Percentage of Women in the Large Independent Agencies, 2017





Between 1998 and 2017, the percentage of female employees decreased at most large independent agencies. This includes SSA, which had a high of 71% of female employees in 1998 and currently has about 64.9%. The percentage of women in 11 agencies increased, from half a percentage point at the Federal Reserve System (from their initial report to OPM in 2012) to more than 6 percentage points at the National Credit Union Administration.

### Gender, Leadership, and Influence

Even more important than women's overall representation in the civil service is their presence in leadership and supervisory roles. As leaders, women have the greatest opportunity to shape policies. Members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) work closely with presidential appointees

to influence public programs. According to OPM, Senior Executives "operate and oversee nearly every government activity in approximately 75 Federal agencies." Supervisors have authority to plan work schedules, assess the performance of others, and provide feedback.

Women's presence as supervisors and Senior Executives differs agency to agency (see Table 2). The lowest percentages of female SES members are found at DOD, Justice, and Energy. HHS is the only Cabinet agency with an SES membership that is half women, at 56%, though HUD comes close at 49%. At least 40% of the Senior Executives at DOE, DOL, Treasury, and DOT are women.

The high percentage of female Senior Executives at DOT is surprising since women comprise only about

**Table 2: Women's Representation in Cabinet Agency Leadership Positions, March 2017**

Agency	Percent (Number) in SES	Comparison to Agency Overall	Percent (Number) of Supervisors	Comparison to Agency Overall (Percentage Points)
Agriculture	37% (119)	-7	32% (3,647)	-12
Commerce	28% (113)	-17	40% (2,203)	-5
Defense	27% (315)	-6	25% (24,537)	-8
Education	43% (34)	-19	57% (366)	-5
Energy	26% (118)	-11	31% (701)	-6
Health & Human Services	56% (238)	-4	54% (4,665)	-6
Homeland Security	30% (185)	-4	29% (8,456)	-5
Housing & Urban Development	49% (46)	-10	50% (671)	-9
Interior	35% (78)	-6	33% (3,420)	-8
Justice	27% (221)	-12	27% (5,908)	-12
Labor	43% (81)	-5	42% (1,088)	-6
State	39% (67)	-14	47% (948)	-6
Transportation	40% (88)	+14	23% (1,716)	-3
Treasury	43% (182)	-19	54% (5,535)	-8
Veterans Affairs	39% (145)	-21	50% (11,875)	-10

a quarter of agency employees. The data show women's representation in the agency is low because there are few women in the Federal Aviation Administration, which employs about 83% of all DOT workers. Most members of DOT's SES come from the smaller bureaus – the Office of the Secretary and Federal Highway Administration – where women are better represented.

There are differences in the percentage of female Senior Executives across the large independent agencies, too (see Table 3). Women are well represented in leadership roles at SSA, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and the National Science Foundation (NSF). The Nuclear Regulatory Commission and NASA – agencies with low proportions of women overall – have the lowest percentages of female leaders.

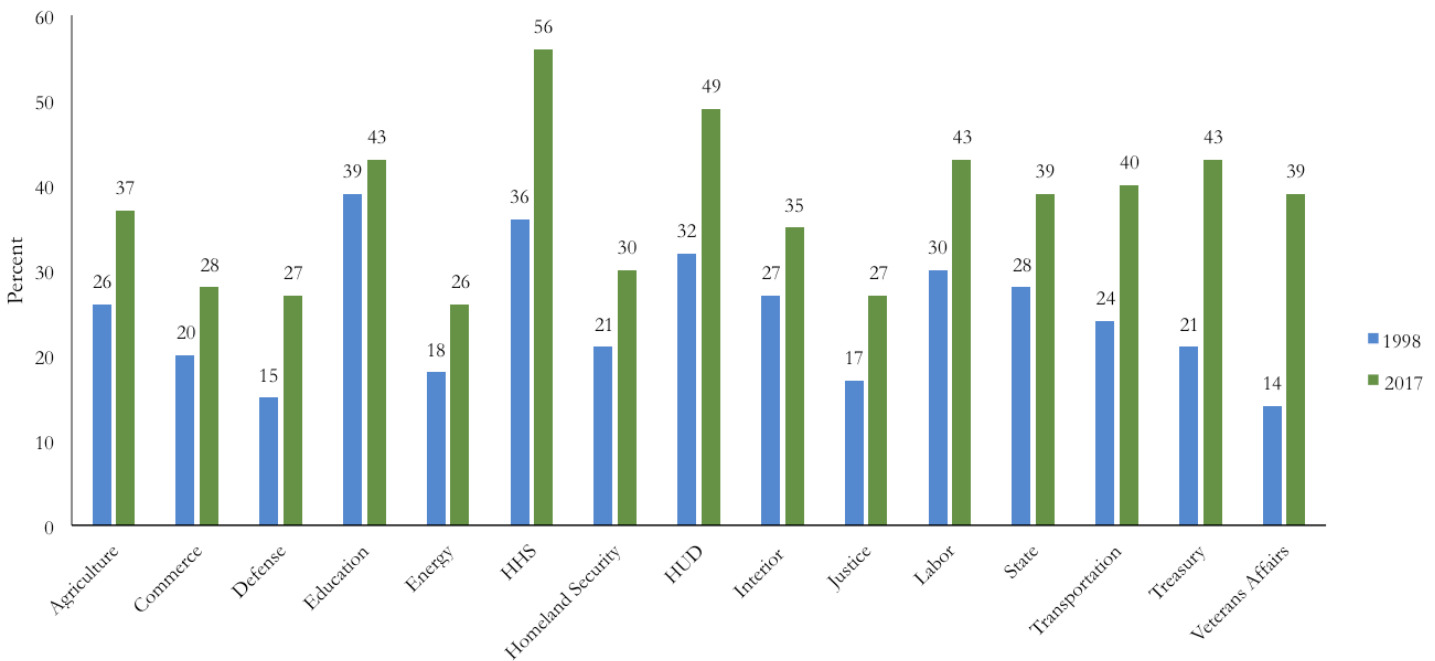
**Table 3: Women's Representation in Cabinet Agency Leadership Positions, March 2017**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>SES</b>	<b>Supervisors</b>	<b>Supervisors Comparison to Agency Overall (Percentage Points)</b>
U.S. Agency for International Development	45% (19)	49% (505)	-4
Broadcasting Board of Governors	-	35% (89)	-5
Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency for D.C.	-	56% (98)	-9
Environmental Protection Agency	44% (115)	46% (836)	-5
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission	46% (15)	60% (205)	-4
Federal Communications Commission	57% (17)	42% (118)	-9
Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation	-	38% (310)	-7
Federal Reserve System	-	44% (134)	-5
Federal Trade Commission	34% (12)	45% (63)	-5
General Services Administration	33% (32)	41% (868)	-5
Government Printing Office	-	33% (82)	-7
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	28% (115)	32% (673)	-2
National Archives and Records Administration	39% (9)	46% (183)	-6
National Credit Union Administration	-	42% (73)	-2
National Labor Relations Board	49% (24)	55% (190)	-8
National Science Foundation	50% (40)	62% (104)	+2
Nuclear Regulatory Commission	29% (36)	29% (118)	-10
Office of Personnel Management	39% (23)	43% (220)	-14
Peace Corps	-	58% (190)	-2
Securities and Exchange Commission	-	38% (346)	-8
Small Business Administration	43% (19)	43% (227)	-9
Smithsonian Institution	-	39% (330)	-4
Social Security Administration	47% (74)	62% (3,984)	-3

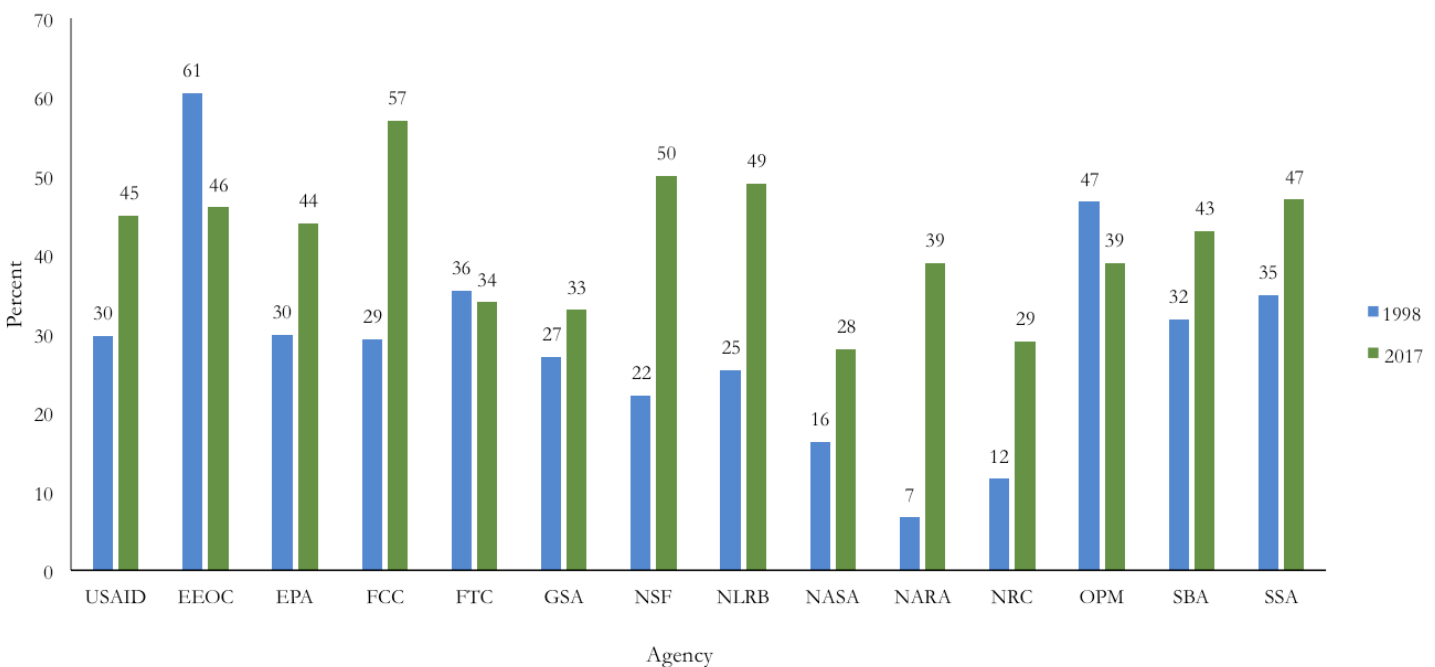
Women tend to fare worse in leadership positions than they do in agencies as a whole. For example, Commerce is comprised of approximately 45% female employees, but only 28% of its SES members are women; this is a difference of 17 percentage points. Columns 2 and 4 of Tables 3 and 4 present disparities between the representation of women agency-wide and as leaders. The largest exceptions occur at DOT and FCC.

Unlike women's overall civil service representation, women have increased their presence in leadership roles throughout the last two decades (see Figures 6 and 7). Women still lag behind men in the SES, but the percentage of female Senior Executives in nearly every federal agency is greater today than in 1998. In many cases, the increase is substantial.

**Figure 6: The Percentage of Women in the SES, Cabinet Agencies 1998 & 2017**



**Figure 7: The Percentage of Women in the SES, Large Agencies 1998 & 2017**



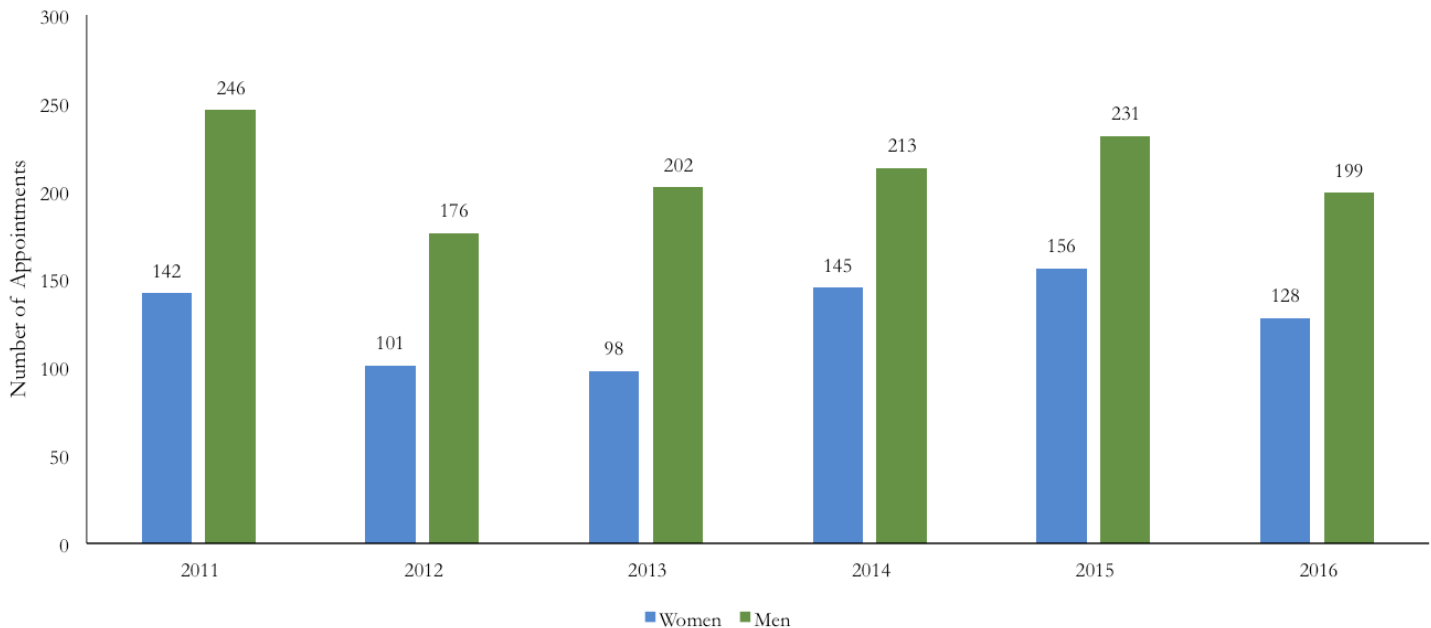
Every Cabinet agency saw growth in the percentage of women in the SES. The smallest change was four percentage points at DOE, while the largest was an increase of 25 percentage points at Veterans Affairs. All but three independent agencies - EEOC, FTC, and OPM - increased the percentage of female SES members. The largest rise, from 7% to 39% women, occurred at the National Archives and Records Association.

While these shifts show a positive trend for women's leadership, it is important to keep in mind the number of SES posts in any agency is a small proportion

of the employees. The FTC has only 35 Senior Executives, and the 1,190 SES members at DOD represent less than 2% of the workforce. Therefore, the addition or removal of one or two of female SES members can result in large percentage changes. To provide a better picture of recent trends, Figure 8 displays the number of men and women appointed to SES posts throughout fiscal years 2011 - 2016. Men receive more appointments than women, but the average number of annual SES selections is only 340.

A civil servant's job function also determines their influence. FedScope's Occupational Category

**Figure 8: The Number of Men and Women Appointed to the SES, 2011 - 2016**



includes the following job classifications:

Professional/Administrative (P/A), Technical, Clerical, Blue Collar, and "Other" White Collar. Each group has a specific set of duties and expectations set by OPM. P/A positions require discretion, specialized knowledge, and personal responsibility, so they have the greatest impact on policymaking. Technical positions support professional roles, and Clerical posts support office and business operations.

Approximately 65% of the positions in the federal agencies fall into the P/A category; clerical and technical posts are about 5% and 17%, respectively. About 66% of female civil servants hold P/A posts, compared to 63% of men. Women also account for a large majority, 69%, of all clerical positions.

The data show women are well-represented in P/A jobs, but the percentage of women in these posts correlates to women's overall presence in an agency. DOE, VA and HHS, where female employees outnumber men, have a higher proportion of women in P/A positions and a lower percentage in clerical posts. The DOD and DHS have lower proportions of women in P/A jobs.

Women's policymaking authority has generally increased throughout time. In fact, the only Cabinet agency where the percentage of women in P/A positions decreased throughout the last 20 years is DOD. Women's representation in decision-making roles at DOD declined by about 2 percentage points.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

Workforce Women's representation varies across the federal government. Women are just a third of the workforce in some agencies, while the percentage of female employees exceeds 60% in others. Although there are more women in influential government roles today, some agencies still have work to do to increase women's presence as civil servants and leaders.

## About the Author:

Gail Baitinger, Ph.D. is a Research Associate at Optimal Solutions Group. She has conducted research on politics and policy in the United States for nearly 10 years, with a focus on women and politics, the media, and health policy. At Optimal, she leads a health policy research team implementing analyses, drafting policy briefs, and providing continuous quality improvement recommendations to support federal and local government clients. Currently, her research focuses on the Medicare program and a mental health system of care expansion initiative. She received her Ph.D. at American University.

## References

1. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has made data available for 122 federal agencies. The most notable agencies excluded from the analysis are the U.S. Postal Service and intelligence agencies. See Note 7.
2. FedScope reports data about agencies in the Executive Branch, but they include information about 8 agencies within the Legislative and Judicial Branches. The total number of employees from these other agencies is only 1,800, so it is not a significant proportion of the data.
3. FedScope includes the majority of civilian employees, but data from the following agencies are not reported: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Office of the Vice President, Postal Regulatory Commission, Tennessee Valley Authority, U.S. Postal Service, and White House Office.
4. The data on the number of employees in the small government agencies are missing in many cases, so analyses of these agencies, as well as the medium agencies, are combined. The small and medium agencies together comprise less than 1% of all federal employees.
5. State stopped reporting data on Foreign Service Officers in 2006. Since women are better represented among the State Department's civil service than they are in the Foreign Service, the spike in women's representation that year is a result of this change in the composition of the data. State's overall representation of women – including the Foreign Service – is closer to 43.7%. Similarly, the U.S. Customs Service, Secret Service, and Federal Law Enforcement Training Center were moved from Treasury to Homeland Security upon its creation in 2003. Less than 35% of the employees at these three bureaus were women, so the spike in women's representation at Treasury from 2002 to 2003 is a function of this shift.
6. The data about the Department of State's overall gender breakdown, including the Foreign Service, come from the Department's own workforce statistics: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/254216.pdf>
7. With almost a quarter of a million workers, the majority of whom are men, women's representation at DOD has a large impact on the gender composition of the federal workforce. Excluding DOD, women comprise 49.3% of the remaining Cabinet and independent agencies, which is higher than women's participation in the U.S. labor force.

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